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Chinese Peasants in "Permanent Revolution"

By Wyndham Newton

The farmers in China were just about shaking hands with themselves over the prospects of a record harvest and a really good share-out of the proceeds among the members of the agricultural co-operatives, when they were told their co-operatives were to be amalgamated into communes right away. Confusion, consternation, and worse must have reigned among them. Obviously in such conditions it became almost impossible to divide the "spoils," which they had earned as never before, for they had been at back-breaking toil solidly, without intermission, all day and in some cases much of the night too—not only on their own agricultural collective but on all sorts of water conservancy, irrigation, and other jobs which were really the responsibility of Government but which they had been ordered to do and for which they and their co-operatives paid.

The sudden and drastic absorption of hundreds of co-operatives and thousands of peasant households in these new public social units or communes is a typical example of the technique of the Communist Party. The peasants, they keep on saying, will take the capitalist road if they are given half a chance—and indeed what happened during the sudden liquidation of 15,000 co-ops in Chekiang and when the free market was temporarily permitted in 1956 showed how right they are. So the only way to keep the peasant off the capitalist path is to hustle him along the socialist road at a breathless pace in continuous revolution—and with him not only his co-operatives but his pigs and his little private garden lot which a benign totalitarian dictatorship had somewhat grudgingly permitted him to retain as his own property.

Everything he has now goes into the commune, even the dividends he expected to derive from the unprecedented toil and the unparalleled crops of the past year. Critics may assert that this technique has its dangers; that the steady and progressive accumulation of disappointments and deceptions, discontent and domination must break loose some day and that the consequences will be all the worse for the technique of retardation. But just now the Party is boss.

The Communist papers themselves admit that many of the people and even of the Party are tired of the mass movements and of the class war and distinctions, and proclaim they are quite unsuitable for what the hierarchy call a Technological and Cultural Revolution. Some ridicule the Party officials saying, as one of the officials put it, that "we depend on movements for a living, and calling us *yun tung yuen*, or opportunists who live on such campaigns." The farmers themselves complained that the pressure put on them by the party cadres had caused them to use up practically all available stocks of manure and fertilizer and that little had been left for the autumn crops though the cadres were insisting on still larger records for these crops.

Moreover, it is admitted, and even the subject of boasting by the Party, that the work done depended almost wholly on hard labour in the fields without benefit of the mechanisation they had been promised. And everywhere there is scepticism over the amazing claim that the total crops this year will be in the region of 350 million tons. Even in the most gorgeous days of the Golden West and the Canadian prairies, crops were never increased at such a rate as China is now claiming. Nevertheless it is clear that there has really been an immense leap forward, and that even the disgruntled peasants will have reason to be happy about it—provided they do in fact get an honest reward for their labour and do not discover all the fruits gathered up in an impossibly large basket from which they cannot be taken and distributed because they are no longer identifiable.

But in any case the Party is bound to win the next round for it is all powerful and is hustling the people into the fields and the hills leading to the Communist paradise at redoubled speed, with plenty of armed watchdogs in the shape of militia to keep them in line and demobilised veterans of the Korean and civil wars to command both the militia and the co-operatives, now to become the communes. The whole movement is in fact on military lines, with battle cries as the slogans.

What exactly is the difference between the farming co-operatives, which have passed through successive annual

stages from the days when the first foundations were laid in the so-called mutual aid teams? Each of the people's communes now established in the rural areas is the merging of a large number of farm co-operatives, ranging from several to scores. The communes are a development of the farm co-ops, not merely their expansion. Farming co-ops are mainly collective economic organisations of peasants to do farming, while communes are basic units of society marked by a single entity of workers, peasants, traders, students and soldiers: a comprehensive development of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, side occupations, and fishery, and a co-ordination of political, economic, cultural and military affairs. In addition to agriculture, people's communes are to develop industry, commerce and education, train militiamen, and exercise the functions of the State power.

In other words, the communes can not only produce abundant products and develop further the economic and cultural work of the farming co-operative but also bring about great changes in the administrative system. In a people's commune, the *hsiang* (rural area) people's council and the commune administrative committee are combined into one with the same machinery and the same forces: the *hsiang* head is the commune director, the *hsiang* people's congress is the congress of commune members, and the *hsiang* people's council is the commune administrative committee. Under this latter body are set up departments or committees of agriculture, water conservancy, forestry, animal husbandry, industry-communications, finance-grain, commerce, culture-education, internal affairs-labour, armed defence planning and scientific research. The explanation is as given in the Party organ, the *Kung Jen Jih Pao*.

It is stated that as agricultural production develops, especially in the big leap forward achieved since last winter, farm co-ops were faced with more and more problems of production which they were unable to solve. The leap forward called for "large-scale agricultural capital construction and advanced technical measures." At the same time, it is contended, it called for an all-round development of agriculture, fishery, forestry, animal husbandry, and side occupations. The order to march ahead in agricultural production lent urgency to the need for developing local industries like chemical fertilisers, iron, steel and farm produce processing to serve agricultural production. The demand for mechanisation and electrification, it was stated, is becoming pressing in the rural areas. In addition, the peasants demand improved housing conditions and development of medical, health, cultural and educational undertakings. To meet all such demands, there must be "massive labour power and technical force, and there must be a large amount of investment and large-scale division of labour and co-ordination. Small villages, it was argued, and the co-operatives are no longer able to meet the needs of development of production as regards manpower and material and financial resources, and are left far behind the development of the situation. The activists demand the acceleration of socialist construction.

The alleged advantages of the communes, apart from the necessity of keeping the peasants moving on the socialist path and to prevent them from retreating back to the old way, are said to be numerous. The amalgamation of APCs into communes embracing thousands of peasant families provide more population and more land, more labour power, funds, and natural resources. They can thus undertake capital construction on a large scale, adopt advanced techniques, develop agriculture and other occupations and set up small and medium industrial enterprises. Their products too are more abundant and varied. At


the same time, conditions are acquired by the communes for developing cultural, educational, medical and health undertakings, to popularise and raise the people's cultural and scientific knowledge and to improve the peasants' poor housing conditions.

The communes also involve a greater degree of collectivisation, and will help to get the women into the field as well as the men and free them from household work by the creation of nurseries, tailoring teams, public messhalls, etc., thereby collectivising even the family life. It will also be "no longer necessary for members to cultivate private plots or to keep their own livestock and fruit trees"—a point of some importance to the ideologists who hate even the smallest vestige of private property. They have always resented the fact that a considerable part of the means of production still contains factors of ownership by the people, even if by groups instead of by individuals. Communes will also be able to eliminate the distinction between town and country, between industry and agriculture and between mental labour and physical labour, and to raise the "Communist ideology of the people and improve their moral quality (from the Party viewpoint) to a considerable degree."

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